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I should have known better. For the past two months now, I have been going on ambush approximately every other night. I cannot calculate how many ambushes I have been on, maybe 20, 30, even 40 by now. After a while, we are too fatigued to remember them all.

I have not pulled KP once during this period, so I presume First Sergeant Letoto is cutting me some slack because of all the ambushes. I opened my big mouth to others, bragging that the gun crew does not have to pull KP, and I suspect somebody complained because now I have to pull KP. We have to get up early in the morning before everybody else to get ready for the day. With luck, the cooks will get the coffee going right away, but it takes time to get the water heated using a field stove. The KPs sit at a mess table bleary-eyed and cotton mouthed while we wait for our coffee to brew.

Breakfast is my best meal of the day, and if the eggs are not too runny, I can actually enjoy the food. Generally, I like my eggs scrambled because they are the least likely to be under cooked, however, there are always bits of eggshell mixed in and that grosses me out when I crunch down on them. I feel like I am eating dirt or something icky. I make an egg sandwich that tastes good, and the bacon is hard to screw up unless they burn it. Lunch and dinner are different stories. When I am around food preparation all day, I have a tendency to loose my appetite.

Our bread is full of little bugs. At first, we find them difficult to stomach and take great efforts to pick out most of the flour-weevils, but after a few weeks, we just eat the goddamn insects regardless. We can always use the calories.

I am stuck on trays. When the men come out of the mess hall, they scrape their leftovers into a 32-gallon garbage can and then dip their trays into another 32-gallon garbage can full of steaming hot water. They give their tray to me; I wash it by hooking a wire into the corner hole, and submerging it into my soapy 32-gallon wash can and scrubbing it with a long handled, large bristled brush. Then I give it to the next man, and he rinses them in another 32-can of hot water, stacks them to air-dry then carries the finished trays into the mess hall for the next man in line.

We heat our wash water using an immersion heater. This device is a four-inch oblong stem about two-feet long with a doughnut shaped firebox on the bottom. Sitting on top of this tube is a gasoline can, which allows you to control the amount of fuel dripping into the firebox. The heater will bring a whole 32-gallon can of water to a roaring boil within a few minutes. It will keep water hot as long as there is fuel dripping, and it is very safe.

The big problem for the KPs is that it is awkward to wash articles in a big 32-gallon can of very hot water. If the pot or tray slips out of your hands, it will sink into three feet of scalding water. Getting the item out is a matter of grappling with a wire hook. Nobody ever thinks of cutting a 55-gallon drum in half lengthwise and making a washtub out of it. That is too practical for infantry cooks to figure out.

Only after a while is a tent erected to keep the KPs out of the sun and rain. With the 100-degree temperature, the work is pure drudgery.



Figure 1 - A Company's Mess Hall – Cu Chi 1966.

I hate the cooks. Actually, I hate all of the cooks in the Army for that matter. They are rude and bossy and most of them are enlisted men like me. I must endure their orders as if I am some sort of trainee. We have a new black cook who attempts to establish a pecking order by ordering me to take out the trash from the kitchen. I nod okay while getting myself a glass of orange juice before it is all gone. The next thing I know, this nitwit is right up into my face telling me to put down the orange juice and take out the trash. I want to shove the lip of this heavy plastic glass right up his jabunggee nose, but I know I will get into a shitstorm after the altercation. He is a pushy bastard, and I stare into his eyes without saying a thing. I can see him tense up at my pigheadedness, and both of us prepare for the sucker punch. “Yeah, sure, no problem,” I tell him dryly, but still I do not move. This is a Mexican stand off. I am not going to budge until he backs off. Just when I fear the worst is coming, Smitty, our chief cook, intervenes, and I take the stupid trash out, but only after drinking my orange juice. That will teach him a lesson or two.

I work throughout the heat of the afternoon, trying desperately to finish the stack of aluminum trays. I will have to rewash the whole rack if they come back with spots of food on them, or they are too greasy. There is virtually no time to take a smoke break; the work is unremitting throughout the afternoon, and it is too hot to have an appetite for the swill they prepare for dinner.

After the evening chow, I notice 2nd platoon gathering around a 55-gallon drum filled with ice and beer, and here I am stuck on KP. I sneak away for a cold one before they are gone because I know nobody is going to save me a can. I think if I do not linger too much then I can drink a few cans and slink back to the mess hall before anybody notices I am gone, but I loiter too long. Becker tells me Sergeant Rodriguez just put Bishop on KP to finish my shift. I feel guilty about Bishop having to take up my slack, so I swiftly return to the caldrons and tell him to get lost. That is just about my last recollection of the evening.

“You had us laughing our asses off last night, Lupton,” O’Shaughnessy tells me next morning.

“What do you mean?” We are saddling up to go on a helicopter assault.

“You came in to the hootch last night looking for the Doc.”

“What do you mean?” I ask wanting to know what for.

“You cut yourself in the shower.” Hmm, I vaguely remember a cascade of water splashing in my face. Lying on the pallet floor of the shower comes to mind.

“Yeah, asshole, the shower was empty this morning. You drained it last night and nobody has any water to wash with this morning,” Greko complains sardonically.

“You gotta be kidding me.” I have a vague recollection of the engineer’s stake that holds up the water pipe with the four showerheads falling and cutting my leg, but it is a real vague memory.

“Yeah, Lupton, you had us rolling on the floor. You don’t remember coming into our hootch last night?” Bailey asks me.

“No.”

“You were buck naked when you came in. You were dripping wet too.”

“I was?”

“Yeah, you cut yourself in the shower and wanted the medic put a band aid on your stupid wound,” O’Shaughnessy informs me.

“What do ya mean?” I do not remember anything.

“Your dumb ass staggers into the hootch yelling Doc, Doc! You tripped over a cot and fell down in the isle. Then you yelled, Doc, Doc, I broke my dick, Doc! You’re too much Lupton; we were cracking up. You had us rolling in our bunks laughing our asses off.”

“You’re shitting me!”

“Nope, you stumbled down to the Doc’s bunk, and made him put a band aid on the cut on your leg.”

“Yeah, Lupton, don’t ever do that again,” lectures the medic. He is seriously pissed at me.

“When you got off KP you came over and drank a few beers, and then we put you into the 55-gallon drum. We shoved you down so all we could see are your head and feet sticking out of it. You just sat in the ice water with a stupid look on your face. Then you started squawking about it being too cold; you said your dick was shriveling up like the Wicked Witch of the East, so we pulled you out,” Becker explains to me in detail how two guys had to pry me out of the drum.

“That explains these scrapes running up and down my back and the back of my thighs.” To take the top off the barrel someone used a chisel, which created the jagged edges that cut my back. The cuts feel uncomfortable under my suspender straps. “I wondered how they got there when I woke up this morning.” I emerged from sleep lying naked on top of my GI blanket. My fatigue shirt and pants are lying in a puddle next to my bunk, and a band-aid is stuck on my thigh where the engineer’s stake fell on me. Because I do not feel hung over, I must have thrown up last night too.

“Yeah, you made quite a spectacle out of yourself, Lupton.” The medic looks at me knowingly with a raised eyebrow and nods up and down, “Don’t ever do that again, Lupton; I’m not shitting you.”

“But Doc,” I say to him grinning, “at least this patient didn’t die on you.” When the doc came to Vietnam, the first four people he worked on died in his hands in spite of his efforts.

“That’s not funny, Lupton.” Except for the medic, everybody is taking my trespass in first squad’s hootch with good humor.

“Everybody saddle oop!” Sergeant Rod wants us in formation.

Helicopters fly us out to the field in company force. When the chopper lands, we leap out, run a few feet, flop down, and squint our eyes against the flying debris until the helicopters are airborne. After the noise settles down, gunships cover us as we organize ourselves into a line, and then we begin sweeping through the village searching for Viet Cong guerillas. As the choppers fly over our heads, rockets explode out of their pods one after the other with great noise then hiss their way to the target. They constantly fire their four flex guns, and the bullets double crack into a rapid montage of static. Hot brass casings hiss and sizzle all around us when they land in the wet paddies. Now I understand why it is impossible for us to surprise the Viet Cong. We are making so much noise, they know exactly where we are, and they just hold up in their holes waiting for us to pass over them.

Our movement through the village is slow and plodding as we search each hootch attempting to locate all the tunnel entrances that every house possesses. The only people occupying the village are very old men, women, and plenty of naked little kids. Sergeant Walker wonders aloud why there are so many knocked up broads, and no men around to knock them up.

Hateful glances follow us as we poke around their hootches without respect or courtesy for the owners' belongings. They stand to the side in small groups not daring to speak to us. Little naked children, not understanding what is happening, stare at us in barren apathy. The women might perform some meaningless chore like sweeping the hard earthen floor of her thatch-roofed house. Old men sit squatting, smoking their foul smelling home-rolled cigarettes, and mumbling indecipherable words in low voices. They have all been through this before. Their odium is palpable; I can feel it crawl up the back of my neck.

I am suspicious of them all. They natter in this strange language, and we never seem to have an ARVN interpreter with us. The best we can manage is, "VC a dao, VC a dao." Where is the VC? Yeah right, as if they are going to tell us where Hubby-the-Cong is hiding, sure. Frustration grows when they say repeatedly, "Com bic, com bic," no understand, no understand. We do not even know what com bic means. Now I ask you, how in the hell are we supposed to find anybody to kill?

After we sweep through the village, Lieutenant Roth tells us we are to hold up to allow the ARVNs to fly a helicopter with a loud speaker on it telling the villagers that we are going to hit the village with artillery fire. If they do not want to get their asses blown away, they should come to our position. Several women and an old man ride forlornly past us in an ox cart drawn by a bulbous gray water buffalo, which snorts his distaste for us too. Following them are elderly grannies, resigned to this fate, leading naked little children by the hand.

Some time passes before sporadic volleys of 105-shells begin crashing into the ville. I am expecting a World War I type of artillery barrage to decimate the village, turning houses into fiery hulks, and driving the Viet Cong insane enough to surrender in droves, but there is true disappointment with the ferocity of this bombardment.

The shelling ceases after half an hour then Lieutenant Roth and Sergeant Rodriguez get us on line to cross the span of rice paddies and reenter the village. The artillery rounds did little damage. There are no Viet Cong kills or even dead civilians for that matter, but we keep running across abundant numbers of old grandmas with wrinkly faces and beetle nut stained teeth, pathetically crawling out of their meager houses. With

boney knees rattling inside loose fitting black pajamas, they stagger up to Lieutenant Roth, their hands pressed together, crying, shaking, and babbling away in gook. They fall on their knobby knees in front of him, bowing deeply, reverently, pressing their hands together, and entreat the Lieutenant not to kill them. This scene repeats several times and it is pitiable.

Part way through the village, we join up with the ARVNs who make up the other half of the pincer. These little soldiers carry American M1 Garand rifles that are just shorter than they are and there appears to be little discipline in their movement.

We find the only casualty of the artillery barrage, a coconut tree shot in half. The ARVNs jump right in and scarf up the coconuts and begin opening them up. They take their knives, and at strategic weak points, slit the fibrous husk easily into three pieces, the nut comes right out. Then they gouge out a hole in the soft spot at one end of the kernel and take their drink.

I take a turn at cracking open a green coconut. I stab my bayonet into the husk but my efforts are truly amateurish. In no time, I have the husk shredded and stringy; I am nowhere near getting off the outer skin of the kernel. As the ARVNs laugh at me, Boutoff mercilessly rags my ass right along with the rest of the platoon. I finally give up and throw the coconut away, but an ARVN soldier picks it up; with little effort, he pries the nut out of the husk and gives it to me. There is more laughter when I almost sever my thumb with my bayonet trying to gouge a hole in the nut. It is mortifying when the juice leaks all over my pant leg, and I demurely hand the stupid thing back to the ARVN for instruction. He gives it back to me with two holes nicely incised, and I finally get my drink of sweet coconut juice. This is a victory for East/West culinary relations.

All afternoon we search other villages until we come to where the company is going to bivouac for the night. Another infantry company in addition to a company of 5th Mech tracks joins us, and a battalion bivouac is created for a few days.

Almost symbolically, we string a single strand of concertina wire in front of our foxhole. Just behind us is an abandoned house that is open on three sides. A thatched roof keeps us dry from the afternoon thunderstorms that are becoming more prevalent. Our machine gun position is a good one.

Smokey Fell left for an emergency leave before we flew out to the field. Boutoff, who normally carries the automatic rifle, now carries the machine gun. Richardson is humping ammo with us this time, and as always, he is a pain in the ass. After we settle into our new digs, I discover Richardson is carrying my missing backpack. I am livid. "Where did you get my pack?" I demand, "Here is my name written across the carrying handle in magic marker." The supply sergeant does not like us to write our names on the equipment, but I have to put my name or initials on every piece of my web gear because items constantly disappear.

"I got this before we moved into the hootches," is his defense, as if this justifies taking somebody's pack whose name appears in plain view.

"Fuck you, Richardson. You swiped it from beside my bed in the new hootch. That is the last place I remember seeing it. I want it back, Goddamn it." Richardson starts bitching about not having anything to carry his poncho and clothes, "hey, fuck you Richardson, you goddamn thief. You figure it out."

"You know, Lupton, one of these days somebody is going to beat the shit out of you." Boutoff shouts at me.

“What the fuck is with you?” I demand. I cannot believe he is taking up sides with Richardson. I can never trust anybody in this unit. One day someone is friendly, the next day he is threatening to beat my ass.

“Eat shit, Lupton!” Boutoff yells at me; he has no intention of getting physically involved. I am too pissed off to give a shit if anybody is going to beat my ass. I grab my pack and yank it off Richardson’s web belt, and dump his junk on the ground.

“Hey, what the fuck do you think you are doing?” Richardson yells at me, “put that shit back.”

“Fuck you, Richardson,” I yell right back at him, “this is my pack and I’m taking it. You can eat a bucket of shit for all I care.” I attach my pack to my web belt and load in my poncho. I do not have my extra socks, shaving gear, or toothbrush because I did not have a pack to carry them when we came out to the field.

“I am going to beat your ass, Lupton,” he threatens.

“Come on then asshole. Do it!” I pick up my M14 and wait for his charge but that is the end of the confrontation. Boutoff and Richardson leave muttering muffled threats. Fuck them both. It is unsettling to be stuck with these assholes. I stay at the hole until both of them come back from chow, and then I leave. When I come back, my pack is still on my ammo belt, so I guess I won my repossession.

A soldier from another unit comes around and tells me he is looking for the whorehouse. We hear rumors that a hooker has set up shop just outside of our barbed wire, and several of our men have taken the opportunity to visit her. I am giving him directions when a retinue of battalion staff officers comes along inspecting our positions. He joins us underneath our hootch pretending to one of us until the officers leave, and then he goes through the break in the wire and gets himself a piece of ass.

The story about the Black Syph Island is still fresh in the back of my mind. Sergeant Price swears he needs a piece of ass, “I lay on that broad for about half an hour, and came twice too! I soaped up real good when I was finished,” he brags to me, “and I never came down with a dose of clap.” He is prudent to be so clean because everybody else who partook comes down with a nasty dose of gonorrhea.

The next morning the company pulls security for a Medcap. The Vietnamese bring their sick children from surrounding villages to see the doctor or a medic. One after the other they trudge past our machine gun position. Some of them are not very sick while others are weak from consumption and cough as they walk on wobbly legs. I watch a black pajama clad old women leading a naked little girl across the rice paddies from the adjoining village. As they approach, the girl appears to have something wrong with her face. “Hey,” I tell the others, “her upper lip looks a lot like her pussy.”

“Ahh, look at Lupton perving on that little girl,” Boutoff jives me, laughing like a stupid jackass.

“Hey, screw you,” I retort angrily as mamasan and her daughter come nearer. I can see the little tyke has a cleft upper lip. Her two front teeth are visible through the gap, and her appearance is somewhat freakish. “I hope the medics can do something for her,” I say, “maybe they can arrange for a doctor to close that gap and make her whole.”

“Are you talking about her lip or her pussy, Lupton?” Boutoff chides me.

“You are one sick son of a bitch, Boutoff,” I tell him as the woman and her daughter disappears behind the house we are guarding.

After the medics finish the Medcap they split back to the battalion bivouac, and we pull a security sweep around the area. In the afternoon, I am sitting in a dry rice paddy and leaning against the paddy dyke. We hear a small explosion. "Lieutenant Roth is hit!" Someone yells, "MEDIC, MEDIC!" The doc runs around the hedgerow to attend to the Lieutenant, and we maintain our position while battalion dispatches an APC to our location. He suffers minor shrapnel wounds in his leg from the small booby trap.

I squeal in pain. I grab the head of my dick as I imagine something is ramming a pin into my gland. I tear at the buttons of my fly and madly open my underwear. I find a slew of little insect legs covering my undershorts. Further searching reveals a mangled centipede still clinging to my dickhead. With shaking fingers, I grab the little bastard, hold him up for a postmortem, and then I revengefully squeeze the remaining juices out of him. Fortunately, he is a juvenile. The son-of-a-bitch bit me right next to my urethra, now the damn thing is smarting, and there is some swelling too. I can clearly see a mark where he bit me. The only thing I can do is sit there lamenting my swollen dick while the APC rumbles away with Lieutenant Roth.

Sergeant Rodriguez gets us up, and we walk toward our bivouac. I have to hold out my pants to prevent my penis from banging into my shorts with each step. When we wait to cross the road, a convoy of ARVNs rides past, and I watch one of them pointing to me while the others in the truck are laughing. Everybody else is laughing at me too. "Ahh, fuck you too," I snap, flipping the ARVNs the bird, "it hurts." I prognosticate my dick falling off and that phantasm of the South Pacific keeps crossing mind, so when we return to our foxhole, I leave to find the aid station.

While I wait for the doctor, I watch Lieutenant Roth leaning on his elbow as he reclines on a stretcher that is elevated about three feet on top of two stacks of sandbags. The battalion surgeon, the executive officer, and another officer are standing around Roth; they are joking, laughing, and poking fun at his little wound. The officers are having a fun time listening to Lieutenant Roth relay how he thinks he tripped the booby trap twice before it went off.

I show the medic my penis. He encourages me to wait while he talks to the doctor. When they come back, the doc looks at my dick, harrumphs, gives me a couple of pills, and tells me these things will make me sleepy then he returns to bandage the Lieutenant's calf. "As long as I'm here," I tell the medic, "I have a sharp pain on the back of my shoulder." I am positive I have a little wound and a nice ride back to Cu Chi with the Lieutenant for some convalescence would be very pleasant right about now. I hold open my shirt, so he can look at the back of my shoulder.

"That's a pimple, Lupton!" he declares in a louder voice than I would have cared to hear.

"It hurts," is my defense. He accuses me of being a hypochondriac, which I deny. Well, so much for my screw around time in the rear. I take my pills, my wounded pride, and my swollen peckerhead back to my gun position. I tell Boutoff I have to take these pills, and they are going to make sleepy. He does not give a shit, and I lie down and fall asleep on some rice straw for the rest of the afternoon. For some reason, nobody messes with me, which is highly unusual, and I wake up in time for evening chow feeling well and rested. My gland is down to normal, and I can piss through it - no problem.

Lieutenant Roth is not badly hurt. He spends a couple of weeks in the hospital, but he is not our platoon leader any more. They reassign him to some rear echelon job in battalion, and I never see him in the company area again.

Company A gets a new commanding officer too. His name is Captain Mayone. I discover he is a pharmacist before the draft finally caught up with him. I just happened to be riding in the front seat of a ¾-ton truck when he climbs in unexpectedly and wants to be personable with two 19-year-old privates whose only life beyond high school is the Army; the conversation is pretty much one sided. He rotates from battalion when Captain Curbow suffers his third wound in the Ho Bo Woods operation. Nobody knows where Captain Curbow goes either; it is a mystery, and I never find out.

I am relieved when Sergeant LaVilla goes on a 30-day emergency leave. Presumably, his wife is tasting forbidden fruit back in Hawaii. At least that is the story I hear. This might explain why he is such a grumpy old bastard, and we are all glad to see the last of him. One should be careful for what one wishes for though because Sergeant Prine is now our squad leader.

Sergeant Price forsakes the supply room and takes over third squad. He usurps my coveted corner of the hootch. When I complain, he tells me to go fuck myself. "Fuck you, Lupton, tough shit," is his reply. My new spot is always hotter than the corner, and I am one embittered private.

"Saddle oop," Sergeant Rodriguez yells. The platoon assembles outside of the hootches for a formation before setting off on a platoon size sweep in front of our bunkers at Cu Chi. I hoist my four boxes of machine gun ammunition over both shoulders and join the formation. We are standing in ranks when Sergeant Prine comes up and tells us we have to carry the M60 ammo in their tin cans. This means I will have to carry the ammunition with my hands, and I have to sling my rifle across my back to be able to do this.

"What do ya mean? They are a pain in the ass to carry like that. I don't have a strap or anything." I protest as the formation begins to move out.

"I don't give a shit what your problems are Lupton this is the way you are going to carry this ammo from now on," orders Prine. "The ammo gets dirty when you carry it in the cardboard boxes, and I want you carrying it in the tin cans from now on. Got that?" I grumble and swear at the asshole under my breath but the platoon is starting to step out on the patrol and nobody is going to delay them until I scrounge up a canvas strap. I sling my rifle across my back and pick up a can in each hand, and we head for the concertina wire.

We are only outside of our perimeter wire when my forearms feel the fatigue from the weight. Each two hundred round can weights 17 pounds and after a half an hour, my forearms are killing me. I feel vulnerable because I have to sling my rifle over my back and if the shit hits the fan, I must drop the cans and unsling my rifle to shoot it, and that takes vital seconds.

Each time we stop, I throw the ammo cans down in disgust and swear to kill Prine at my first opportunity. After doing this a few times, Boutoff turns around and threatens to beat my ass if he hears me throwing down the ammunition again. We scream, "Fuck you too," several times at each other and by the end of the patrol, I am seriously thinking about killing him also.

The ammo bearers and assistant gunners manage to scrounge canvas straps with clips on both ends. Now we have to carry both cans of ammo on one shoulder. The cans are loose, unbalanced, and flop around when we walk. The worst part is the strap is not padded and cuts cruelly into my shoulder. Sergeant Prine does not give two shits to a fart in the wind how much pain I must endure. We all hate it, and we all hate his snotty guts too.

It always unnerves me when I see this happen. We are waiting in groups of six for our chopper ride to an LZ. After taking out the second lift of grunts, the helicopters are returning and now it is our turn. Before we can board, the crew chiefs, and gunners, climb out of their helicopters and get down on their hands and knees to search for bullet holes in the underbellies of the choppers. This is wonderful I muse. After they find no damage, we hustle into the choppers, and the formation takes off for the short ride to the LZ. The helicopters rise up a foot or two then they nose forward, slowly gaining speed until they lose their ground cushion, which changes the sound of the blades to a more subtle rhythmic drumbeat.

The temperature cools at 100 feet, and we enjoy our ride over squiggly rice paddies, some of which are beginning to fill up with water. We watch numerous farmers guiding ponderous water buffalos pulling a single wooden plow through the now softening mud. The ground is mostly brown, but it will shortly become a lush verdant hue for as far as one can see.

Events quicken as we descend from 500 feet. Filling the big cargo door, as the formation turns towards the LZ, is the Witches Tit. Now I know which direction we are flying; I can always orientate myself to the mountain. It is the only raised land mass in the flat plane where the average elevation is only 18 meters above sea level.

The noise is frightful as we make our final descent into a large wet rice paddy. The gunships pass us on both sides as we slow for the approach. They fire their flex guns, rockets roar out of their pods one after the other, and then our door gunners open up with their M60s. The ground rapidly reaches up for us, so we can unass the helicopter quickly. I cannot hear anything except the covering fire. I run a few feet and settle down on my side into the muck, waiting for the choppers to leave. When the staccato thrashing of the blades and low whining of the jet engines whirl away, we attempt to regroup into our platoon formation. The prior two lifts of infantry are securing the LZ and the incoming is very infrequent. We must flop back down into the mud when sniper fire comes from the bamboo hedgerow to our left front. I squish down low to get below the rim of a rice paddy dyke. Our platoon engages the sniper, and we must remain lying in the mud while a medivac flies in for somebody with a slight bullet wound.

The company moves slowly through several villages taking sniper fire from every one of them. We come to a halt when several bullets crack over the head of the man in front of me. There is no return fire because there are civilians throughout the area. I am cowering behind some bushes along a path, and after a while, I begin to doze off. My eyelids feel heavy and my head droops. Bliss is approaching when the sniper fires several rounds at Boutoff. I jerk awake. I am alert for only a few more minutes when I begin to nod off again. Crack, crack. That bastard sniper will not give up. I search the trees for some clue. Anything to give him away, but I see nothing. I begin drifting off again; my head droops from the weight of my helmet when Edwards taunts the VC. I open my eyes to see him standing full upright looking for movement in front of us.

Bang! The bullet kicks up dirt right beside his foot. I laugh at him as he jerks himself back behind the tree. "That was close Edwards; you'd better watch your dumb ass." I taunt him.

"That stupid motherfucker, I'll get his ass," he replies from behind a tree, but he never does.

Several of us walk to a house on our flank and attempt to chat up the Vietnamese women standing outside of their house in a vain attempt to discover the position of the VC. We try the, "VC a dau," routine again, but they do not buy into it. A young girl offers us clear drinking water. We search our pockets to give them a present in return. The only thing I can find is a pack of sugar and coffee. I know they do not drink coffee, but they take anything I have to offer them. Somebody else gives them a packet of salt and pepper. This is bizarre I think to myself. We are friendly to a Vietnamese family that does not have a man around and they reciprocate. Then their men folk shoot at us as we leave. This is a strange war. We return to our positions and the sniper resumes shooting at us once more. He is a lousy shot but he hides well.

The company moves on slowly, and we ignore the stupid ass sniper. After crossing a large expanse of rice paddies between two villages, we search a ville that is populated by young men, not a lot of them, but enough to make me wonder why we are not being fired upon. The villagers offer us a coca cola, and I pay them 10 cents in MPC for each bottle. They seem grateful for the cash. There is some banter between the teenage girls and the GIs. Somebody asks to see an old man's canuk, his ID card; only to discover this old boy is 90 years old. He is slim and fit with a full pure-white goatee. Not one of those stringy things Ho Chi Minh has. We laugh and joke about his advanced age. I pat the old fellow on his shoulder, and he smiles warmly back at me. I figure he is 71 when I am born.

We are digging in a few meters from the edge of the friendly village. There is no shade in the rice paddy, and we take our shirts off to labor in the hot sun. After about half an hour, word comes down that we must put on our fatigue shirts. This is preposterous in this heat, but we must comply with the stupid order, much grumbling about chicken shit ensues.

Helicopters bring us c-rations and fresh water. One of the white plastic water jugs falls out of a chopper when it takes off, and it lands several hundred meters in front of our lines. Moschkin volunteers to go out and retrieve it. As soon as he picks up the empty 5-gallon water can, he receives a burst of sniper fire. That stupid sniper from the hostile village is after us again. Moschkin is tall and lanky; his arms and legs flail about like Ichabod Crane on his ride through Sleepy Hollow as he dives behind a rice paddy dyke. First platoon's machine gun shoots up the tree line where the firing comes from. Their machine gun bullets crack low over Moschkin's head. He does not know which side of the rice paddy dyke to hide behind. Praying as fast as he can, Moschkin cowers as far down into the dirt as possible.

Boutoff opens up on a hootch and sets the thatch roof on fire. Several APCs and a tank rumble out from our line, charging the village, shooting their 50 caliber machine guns into the tree line, they close on the sniper. Moschkin sees his chance to escape; he grabs the 5-gallon can and runs toward us as fast as he can.

Tracer bullets have set a haystack on fire, and Viet Cong munitions begin exploding. The haystack will continue to cook off all night long.

We eat our c-rations while sitting on the paddy dyke in front of our hole and laugh about Moschkin's near-death experience.

"There goes the ambush," mentions Boutoff casually.

"Where?" I ask him. The haystack explodes with a muffled bang; we can hear the popping of small arms ammunition exploding.

"Right there in front of us, there are 13 of them. Ya see, count 'em."

"I can't see shit."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope, nothing," is my reply. I gather my night vision is extremely bad.

The next morning we do the same thing as the day before, search villages. I purloin a piece of aluminum sheeting to use in the foxhole that night. The old gook I swipe it from curses me, but screw him.

When the rains began several weeks ago, I wrote my mother and asked her if she would send me a rain suit and surprisingly enough she did. It is a dark green, almost black, rain-jacket, and pants. The thing provides me with some warmth at night too.

We dig in for the night as the clouds build in the west; it starts raining right around six o'clock. It rains hard too. Everybody else huddles underneath poncho tents trying to stay dry, but I just get into my new rain suit. I want to join my compatriots underneath our poncho hootch, but Boutoff tells me to staff the machine gun, reluctantly I do. I take my poncho and cover the gun so the rain will not splatter dirt all over it. I can hardly see past the perfunctory single strand of barbed wire we strung in front of the holes. Man it is raining hard. Lightning is flashing and crashing in all directions. I incline on the parapet and watch the foxhole fill up with water. When the rain lightens up, people begin emerging from their shelters. I take my poncho and begin folding it up to take with me on ambush.

"Lupton, what are you, some sort of pussy?" Boutoff watches me preparing the poncho.

"What? Hey, I want to lie on this thing tonight."

"You're a pussy Lupton, taking that poncho on ambush." He tries to goad me at every opportunity; I just ignore him.

It is still raining lightly as we walk away from the company position. I am wearing my rain suit, but now I regret doing so because it is hot and humid; I sweat profusely underneath the rubber garment. Fortunately, for me, the ambush is only going straight out in front of the night defensive position a couple of hundred meters. The lightening illuminates us as we walk. Sergeant Walker positions the machine gun behind a low row of bushes. There is a gap in the vegetation where we place the machine gun. The camouflage is very good here. I quietly spread out the poncho for all of us while Boutoff strings out the Claymore, and I take the first watch.

After an hour or so, I am beginning to feel sleepy. The heaviest thing I ever lift in Vietnam are my eyelids, they weigh a ton, a ton each. Even after holding them open with my fingers, they want to snap closed. I attempt a respite by letting my lids close, but I still have to make a brawny effort to keep my head up. Even this defeats me. Crack! A probing shot snaps over my head. My eyes pop open; I am instantly vigilant. The Viet Cong are trying to sucker us into disclosing our position. Time passes slowly, crack, crack. Another two rounds fly over our heads. Once again, I snap awake. I ready my

M14 to fire but there is no movement in front of me. Nobody else returns fire or moves around. Again, my eyelids weigh heavily.

My head is almost to the ground when Sergeant Walker runs over and tells us to get up. "We're moving. Hurry, hurry," he whispers to us. Everybody scrambles to gather up his web gear and ammunition to be ready. We get the signal to go, and I must struggle to keep up with the running patrol, leaving the poncho spread on the ground. My machine gun ammunition boxes clang against each other as I lope. It seems like everybody is making an awful lot of noise. The ambush withdraws a couple of hundred feet and settles down into a freshly plowed but somewhat dry rice paddy. The sandy soil is gritty underneath us and the dirt chaffs our elbows.

"Lupton," Boutoff whispers, "where is that poncho you brought with you?"

"I left it back there." I tell him.

"A shit, we could sure use it now."

I turn my head and whisper in his ear, "You're a pussy, Boutoff."

"Aw fuck you, Lupton," he grumbles as he tries to shake some sand out of his sleeves.

The Viet Cong lob a dozen mortars into the company's position. I can hear the rounds leave the tube in the same direction as our former ambush, and I listen to the explosions in the distance a minute later. The company calls in artillery on the Viet Cong. The 105-rounds crash in several volleys, and then it is quiet, nothing happens to us in our new position for the rest of the night. The three of us stay alert for several hours until we decide upon a guard schedule. We each take our turns until Sergeant Walker gets us up at dawn. He waits until the sun is up before we go back to our original ambush site. I recover my poncho, and Boutoff retrieves the Claymore before we walk back to the company's defensive position.

When we get back to the company, I learn that Hamby, Stemic, and Bailey ran back to the bunker line instead of coming with us. They just walk into to the night defensive position unchallenged. Nobody can figure out why the linemen do not kill all three of them. Hamby looks at Walker, "Hey, you told me to wait for the word to leave and you never came back for us,"

"No, I told you to come with me," Walker retorts. Stemic even fires a couple of M79 rounds at the ox cart the VC were carrying their mortars on. Nobody knows why Walker picked up and ran away when there were Viet Cong within shooting distance in front of us.

Everybody feels blameworthy when Sergeant Rodriguez tells us one of the VC mortar rounds landed in a foxhole containing mortar Sergeants Taylor and Watts. The mortar bomb set off a hand grenade on one of the men's web belt when it hit. All they find is mush in the bottom of the hole.

As we eat our morning c-rations, the medivac helicopter flies the bodies out. I watch it drift off into the distance and wonder why we did not engage the Viet Cong. Walker could have repositioned the machine gun to take them on. It seems like a perfect chance to kill some of the little bastards that we have been searching for all of these months then the two mortar sergeants might be alive.

When we come back from the field, we learn that Till, one of our cooks, just returned from Saigon with Cheatum. They needed to get a physical for their health certificates.

Cheatum is all pissed off at Till, claiming he walked in on him while he was eating out a Saigon whore. “Yeah, I walk in the room and there is Till with his head stuck down in between her legs just eaten away.” Cheatum laps his tongue to mock how he found Till licking her pussy. “She is giggling and cooing with a big stupid smile on her face. I wanted to beat his damn ass right there,” Cheatum is somber. He is disgusted with Till. “You know goddamn well the 25th Division fucked her, half of the 1st Division, and whole of MACV had their dicks in her and here is old Till with his tongue between her legs just a chomping down on that nasty stinky-ass pussy, and this is after I fucked her!” Till is flummoxed; his face turns red and he avoids eye contact.

“Hey Till, did you really eat out a Saigon whore?” Sergeant Price wants to know.

“Naw, not really,” replies our cook.

Big black Cheatum strides up beside Till. “Aw bullshit you didn’t,” he bellows. Cheatum, our big buck Mandingo, appears ready to pound his ass into the ground. Till would have no chance of surviving.

“I betcha he did too,” Price snickers, “You look like a pussy eater, Till.”

“You better believe he ate that nasty old Saigon whore,” Cheatum resentfully asserts, “I wanted to beat his ass for it, but I’d get into a shit storm and have to do his work too!”

“What did Till cook this morning?” We all want to know.

“He cracked the eggs for scrambling.” Cheatum responds angrily.

“Well, I ain’t gonna eat any eggs if he made ‘em,” says Sergeant Price sarcastically, “eating out some nasty-ass old Saigon whore like that, and you coming back here to cook for us! How do we know you ain’t got some disease we don’t want?”

“I didn’t eat out that goddamn Saigon whore!” Till blurts out, rankled, and finding this joke is growing old, “I fucked her, but I didn’t eat her,” he smiles slyly, “well, maybe... I sniffed her pussy a little.”

“Ahh ha, ya see, you did eat out that goddamn Saigon whore!” Cheatum will not back off. Laughter erupts at his confession; a victory for Cheatum, there is smiles to be had everywhere.

“I don’t want anything this stupid motherfucker has touched,” says Price seriously. Sergeant Price thinks Till will give him VD.

“Me neither,” I say jokingly. I flash back to the Black Syph Island. Maybe I do not want to eat any scrambled eggs either.

“Me either,” chimes in somebody else.

“Yeah, me too, I don’t want any.” The whole line of men files past Till in the chow line holding their trays so he cannot put any scrambled eggs on them. We sit down at the tables with our chow; everybody is smirking and laughing their asses off.

We have an inspection when we get back to the hootches. I work cleaning the machine gun bolt while Boutoff cleans the trigger mechanism, and Caldwell works on the barrel. We are sitting on a poncho spread out on the ground between the 3rd and 2nd squad hootches. The Army does not like us to use gasoline or other petroleum products to clean our weapons, except oil. Gasoline is dangerous and caustic but it will take off the carbon very easily. I cheat and use some Zippo lighter fluid to get the bolt clean, and I am finished before everybody else is. I have a problem though. I loose the tiny pin that inserts into the retaining screw on the back of the bolt. It maintains spring pressure on the firing pin. We search the grass until we finally realize it is history. Everybody is

pissed at me. I feel bad too because the machine gun is worthless without that little pin. I suggest we use a nail but Sergeant Prine tells me the pin is case hardened steel and a nail will not work.

Acerbically, Sergeant Prine looks me up and down. I can tell from the look in eyes that disgust and contempt has a new meaning. “Ya know Lupton, you are sorry. I mean you are one sorry individual.” I do not know what to say to him. In a huff, Boutoff throws the machine gun together and stomps off. “Now what are we going to do if we need to use the machine gun, *Lupton?*”

“I don’t know Sarge. Maybe Boutoff should clean the machine gun all by himself next time.” I probably could have said something more conciliatory at this point, but I see an opportunity to get out of a tedious chore, besides, I do not want to clean the gun in the first place. He threatens me with shit burning duty for my intransigence, but what can I do now, the pin is gone. Sergeant Prine leaves in a huff, shaking his head and mumbling to himself. Caldwell just looks at me through his spook-eyes and snickers at me with contempt. “Fuck you, Caldwell.”

“Fuck you, Lupton.”

I sit down cross-legged to finish cleaning my rifle. I survey the poncho once more and the grass around the edges, but finally I give up looking, the pin is gone. In guilty desperation, I walk over to the supply room to see Sergeant Gallegos and ask him if he has another one. To my astonishment, he gives me a brand new bolt, no questions asked. I cannot believe it! Normally, Gallegos is tight with supplies. You would think he was paying for the damn stuff out of his own money.

I go back to the hootch and slide the bolt into the machine gun. Now I feel blameless, happy to have fixed the problem I created. When Boutoff comes into the hootch, I proudly tell him I got a new bolt. He opens the top lever of the gun, cocks it, and then gently lowers the bolt into the chamber. He turns toward me and tells me never to touch the machine gun again. No, “gee wiz, this is great Lupton; you got the machine gun working again; now where did you get this bolt from, Lupton?” I get no appreciation at all, zip, nada. Well fuck you asshole.

I am tired. I mean physically tired, not just tired of all of the bullshit we have to put up with from the lifers and the tedium of Army life. I am just fucking tired. In my mind, I hatch a scheme to get out of this company. I hate it and all of the people in it. I go on sick call this morning. I am going to tell the doctor I have been having nightmares, and he will feel sorry for me and recommend an assignment in the rear. The motor pool would be acceptable or the battalion PX will be even better. The logic is clear in my head. I am sure I can pull it off without a hitch. They must get me out of this infantry duty.

I tell the medic I want to go on sick call. He wants to know what for, but I am evasive. Having him scuttle my plans even before I get to see the battalion doctor is my first hurdle, and I will not be defeated so easily. He okays my visit to the battalion aid station, and I find myself sitting with a bunch of other guys waiting our turns to see the doctor.

Ward is lying face down on a stretcher with his pants down around his knees. The medic gives him a condescending lecture about keeping the crack of his ass clean. If I were Ward, I would feel insulted by this patronizing homily, but he does not appear embarrassed by this disdainful oration on his personal hygiene. The medic spares no pity

for Ward as he clamps a swab of gauze with a hemostat, dips it into an alcohol-based solution, and then swabs Ward's butt crack. Ward's head rises from his forearms sporting an outlandish look on his face as the sting shoots through his dirty ass cleavage. Everybody surveying the procedure roars with laughter. Some people have no shame I think to myself.

The room of men dwindles one after another as the doctor dispenses remedies, mostly aspirin, for minor problems until I am the last one remaining. Now is my big chance to get out of the infantry. "Lupton, what's the matter?" Doc Whittington asks me.

"I have been having nightmares, Sir," I tell him with as much foreboding in my voice as I can possibly muster without sounding too corny.

"What kind of nightmares?"

"Ah, well, I woke up one night feeling like the bunker was falling in on me. I was sweating terribly..."

"Is that all?" He wants to know.

"Well," I stammer, lost for words. I feel my scheme is running short of gas. "I don't know why we have to do the things they have us doing."

"How do you mean?" His questions are endless.

"Ahh, well, we have to fill sandbags and keep awake at night, and, and we have to go out on a lot of ambushes. I feel like I am having nightmares." Anybody with half a brain can see through this façade and this doc looks through me like a pain of glass.

"What it sounds like to me, Lupton, is that you are trying to shirk your duty, or you are not very bright, or not very educated." Ooh, he hits me right where it hurts the most. "How far did you go in school, Lupton?"

"I only went through 8th grade, Sir."

"Well you see, that is the reason then," he turns and walks away leaving me standing there feeling like the biggest jerk the world has ever known. I am pissed that he got me off my train of thought. I did not mean to complain about the tedium of Army life; I wanted to talk about my nightmares, or nightmare. Damn!

The doctor reappears from behind the door, "Here Lupton, here is a prescription that will make you feel better," says Whittington. He hands me a small piece of paper while looking at me with dismay written all over his face.

"Thank you, Sir." I humbly reply and slink out of the aid station with my tail between my legs. I head back to the company area with a sinking heart and feeling stupid for attempting my sham in the first place. Jesus H Christ, what an asshole I am.

"Hey, Doc," I yell at the medic. The others are off on the bunker line working and there is only the two of us. "Hey, what does this scribble say anyway? Captain Whittington gave me this prescription, and I cannot read his handwriting." He looks at it thoughtfully, but he can only decipher the last couple of words.

"It looks like 'everyday,' I am having trouble reading it too, 'for relief.' Yes, it says 'everyday for relief.' Let me see, it looks like, 'm...ma, mas...bate,' here we are, 'masturbate everyday for relief.'" His face is detached for a few seconds, but then his simper turns into a smirk and the corners of his mouth curve upwards into the stupidest shit-eating grin I have ever seen in my life. He looks up at me.

"What does masturbate mean, Doc?" Only the undereducated and truly naïve can ask a question like this.

“He wants you to jerk off every day to get relief, Lupton” is his answer, and then he looses his restraint. Doc doubles over clutching his stomach while leaning against the sandbag wall of the hootch. This is the final humiliation. I will never try to skate out of the line again. I snatch the paper from his hand, crinkle it up into a little ball, and jam it into my pocket so no one can ever see it. The medic turns hysterical; I am mortified! How can things go this wrong for me? Jeez-us, I wish I never enlisted in the first place. Now if the medic will never mention this to anybody I will salvage some modicum of redemption. “Hey, Doc, you don’t need to be telling anybody about this, ya know.”

“Don’t worry, Lupton, your malady is safe with me.” He continues crumpling against the sandbags laughing hysterically.

“Thank God for small favors,” I say to myself. I walk up to the bunker line, relieved to escape his taunts.

Normally everybody is entitled to two cans of beer or soda per day. At least that is what we understand the regulation to be. Nobody has ever seen this MACV regulation or is even aware that a formal two-beer a day rule even exists, but generally, we all get two beers a day, most days anyway. Sergeant Rogers, our weapons platoon sergeant, constructs a makeshift bar using old mortar boxes. With rubber tree trunks for uprights, he makes a crude bar room with the moldy old piece of canvas we used to surround the latrine pit when we first arrived at Cu Chi. It is the best anybody can come up with, and it is crude even for enlisted infantry.

Captain Mayone allows him to sell the men two shots of hard liquor in addition to their two cans of free beer. I forgo the booze because I do not like the way it cauterizes the back of my throat when I swallow it. I just take the beer - screw the soda.

The black guys seem to like the hard stuff the most and there is a lot of bickering with Sergeant Rogers when he is selling the liquor by the shot. Some men want more of the hard shit, and Rogers will not sell more than their two-shot ration. They solve this problem by trading their beers with other guys for their shots.

The Brothers congregate in small groups of twos and threes laughing and jiving amongst themselves. Loud jig-a-boo music wafts out of a 1st platoon hootch. It does not take very long before they are soused and irrepressible. There are snickers, sneers, and taunts of Black Power, white pussy; dirty ghetto language fills the air. I feel uncomfortable, as on ambush where I portend something bad will happen. I move on.

Sure enough, after taking my shower, shaving, and brushing my teeth I am sitting on my bunk lacing up my boots when I hear angry voices arguing a short distance from my hootch. Curiously, I walk down the isle to the opposite end of the hootch where I peer through the screen to see Buxton bickering with Lieutenant Roth. Wavering unsteady on his feet, Buxton is holding his M16 with a magazine in it. He is arguing in Roth’s face; accusing him of prejudice. Roth denies the allegation. He wants Buxton to give up his rifle. I can see concern on his face when Buxton attempts to chamber a round; Roth has no choice but to grab the rifle, both men struggle for control. Buxton is too drunk to give a good fight, and Roth muscles the weapon out of his hands. He orders Buxton to go back to his hootch and sober up. The two men quarrel with each other further before Roth just walks away with Buxton’s M16. Buxton is too drunk to comply with anybody at this point. He stands there by himself on unsteady feet then stumbles over to the hootch where the Soul music is blaring. He continues his drinking with the Brothers.

I walk with Swanwick to the EM club where we can swill fifteen-cent beers and buy all we can drink. We pass two black guys from third platoon who are kicking at somebody's head in a drainage ditch the engineers have dug with a trenching machine. Both of us yell at them, and the two drunken niggers tell us to fuck off. That is not good enough for Swanwick, and we walk over to them. The man in the ditch is Jones. He is a quiet and easygoing black guy from the first platoon, and he is one of the few blacks in the company I like. The two idiots threaten us in menacing voices, posture like fools, and flex their muscles like bulls preparing to charge. We stand firm and stare at them, and suddenly they lose interest and saunter away, slapping each other's backs and calling us motherfuckers.

Black people are okay when they are one on one, but when there are two of them against one, they turn predatory. When there are three of them together, look out; they behave like a pack hyenas. Both of us shake our heads in dismay at the spectacle. Swanwick invites Jones to drink beer with us at the EM Club, but he declines and walks back to the hootches. Hard liquor brings out the evil in some people.

I am as soused as I can be when I stagger back from the club. I find myself walking behind this asshole from second squad. I cannot remember his name. He is a replacement we acquired from some other outfit, and I can see why they wanted to get rid of him. Built like a tank, strong as a bull, and dumber than dog shit, he brags to his companions how he is going to beat the ass of anybody who pisses him off. Big mouthed and broad shouldered he swaggers along the road taunting the men he over takes; nobody is foolish enough to take him on. I hang back waiting for him to put some distance between ourselves because I know this brute can whoop me easily. Demon rum is everywhere.

On my way back, I have to cross a small drainage ditch. The engineers have placed a culvert in the drainage ditch then covered it with dirt; sandbags are stacked on both ends forming a footpath. I manage to miss the conduit and step into the ditch, my forehead falling hard on the opposite side. With my fingertips, I feel the jagged metal tip of an engineer's stake. The steel post protrudes a few inches above the ground, and I realize how close I came to tearing out my left eyeball. I missed my million-dollar wound by only a few inches.

Staggering into my hootch, I lie down on my bunk and stare at the ceiling. Before long, I realize the joists are trying to rotate perpendicular to themselves right before my eyes. "This is a good sign of total inebriation," I muse to myself. My mouth fills with spit, I feel my salivary glands swell; a barf is coming on. I struggle to sit up, but the room is revolving rapidly around me, even though it never seems to come full circle, I feel disorientated. By crawling on my hands and knees, I manage to push open the screen door. Drooling like a mad dog, I lurch for the third rubber tree from the hootch. Everybody pisses on the poor third tree, it is far enough from the hootches not to stink, and much more convenient than the piss tubes across the back road. Tonight I add my vomit to the amalgam at the base of the tree. No need to induce my stomach to regurgitate all the swill I imbibed at the EM club. It spews forth in three colossal torrents; I blow the residual out through my nostrils as the damn stuff burns its revenge.

I lean my ass against the rubber tree then slide down to sit on the ground. Oh, how I hate this infantry shit, and this tree reeks of piss, puke, and self-loathing.

Revisiting my bunk, I realizing my ass is wet and smelly, so I drop my drawers before falling onto my cot. Someone turns out the light, and I lie in my underwear dreaming of the life of a MACV REMF and the big PX when Sergeant Price yanks the screen door open with a bang. "Where is that fucking asshole, Allunde?" He stands leaning against the doorframe hunched over because otherwise he will fall. When he surmises this is not Allunde's hootch, he staggers outside, and I can hear him rummaging through his footlocker. "I'll get that fucking Allunde, I'll show that motherfucker." Price jams a magazine into the handle of the 45 and yanks the slide back to load his pistol. "Motherfucking Allunde, wait till I find his goddamn ass," expletives spew forth as he staggers away with the pistol cocked. A few minutes later, Sergeant Allunde crashes through the screen door.

"Where is that asshole, Price?" Allunde demands as he tries to maintain his balance. I can see his M16 silhouetted against screen. He lurches down the middle of the hootch with heavy feet and out the other door. I feel helpless lying here in my skivvies waiting for the gunshots; if both of them killed each other, I will not give a shit for either one. The room resumes its spinning, and I wake up the next morning actually feeling not too bad at all. This is the last time Captain Mayone permits Sergeant Rogers to sell hard liquor in the company area again.

The rain is very regular now. Every afternoon and evening, there are thunderstorms the likes of which I have never seen before. Our patrol holds up waiting for dark. Each man is resting against a rubber tree as rain begins falling, slowly at first then it pours down in a spate. Lightening flashes all around us with bolts of brilliant pure-white light that destroys our night vision. I lean against my rubber tree musing how macho we are sitting unsheltered in a thunderstorm as the rain intensifies into a deluge. The water drips from my helmet onto my back where a rogue drop finally runs down the crack of my ass and refrigerates my anus. Whoa, that is cold!

In pitch-blackness, the ambush starts out for our objective. It is so inky black I cannot see a thing, and I have to put my hand out in front of me and just keep walking. Eventually, my hand pushes up against Knott then I know the column has stopped. After the lightning strikes, I can see virtually nothing.

The air is cool and not distorted by the heat of daytime sunlight. The lightning flashes white again, and I can peer clear down the narrowing row of rubber trees. I do not realize the ambush resumes walking until the lightning flashes once again, allowing me to see the front of the patrol walking away. I hike quickly to catch up so as not to split the ambush in two. It is too spooky trying to get back together in the dark. I quick step until I bump into Knott once again.

Sergeant Walker sets up the ambush with the machine gun in the center of the kill zone. It is pouring rain now as never before. Boutoff sets out the Claymore and strings the wire back to us. I lay my poncho on the ground, lie on half of it, and wrap the other half over me to keep the rain off my face. My feet stick out, and they remain cold and wet. The only dry part of my body is the top my head; I stick my noggin inside of my helmet to use as a pillow. There is more lightning, more drenching rain, and this deluge continues throughout the night.

I cover my face with the poncho and attempt some sleep, but I cannot nod off, even though I am tired as hell. I realize I am breathing heavily. I lift the corner of my cover and flap in some fresh air. My breathing returns to normal; now I feel drowsy

again. I resume my repose only to realize again that I am breathing up all of the oxygen underneath the poncho, and once more, my breathing quickens to compensate. I reposition my rifle under the edge of the poncho permitting enough airflow for me to drift off into a dreamy slumber with the comforting pitter-patter of raindrops striking my cover a mere inch above my ear.

When Knott wakes me up for my guard, the rain is still pouring down hard. I turn on my stomach and put my rifle under my chin, propping the weapon on one of my ammo cans. This is enough to make me comfortable for a little while. On some ambushes, I lean back against a tree and remain content until my ass falls asleep then I have to lie down on my stomach again. In the rice paddies, comfort is even scarcer. I must always lie on my stomach, and it becomes difficult to keep my head up when wearing a steel pot and remain alert at the same time, especially in the early morning hours. Tonight I am able to stay awake because I am so uncomfortable, but after a while, my eyes become heavy, it is a burden to stay conscious. When my two hours have grudgingly passed, I wake Boutoff for his guard then quietly I lie back down and rearrange my poncho blanket.

Now I want a cigarette, badly! I feel the lymph nodes under my jaw swell and after a while, I am obsessed with smoking a damn cigarette. The urging throbs and nags at me until I succumb. We are not supposed to smoke on ambush but everybody does it after Fitch told Lieutenant Roth he smoked a cigarette when both were sitting next to each other on ambush, and the Lieutenant never knew it. I drag my poncho well over my head taking particular pains to make sure it is covering my steel pot as well, so there will be virtually no light escaping when I fire up my Zippo. With wet hands, I pull out a Camel from my pack and put it between my lips. I turn the lighter on its side and strike it several times, but it will not light. There are plenty of sparks, so I know the flint is not wet, but still it will not flame up. I am breathing heavily again, so I lift the corner of the poncho and flap it several times to refresh the oxygen content. Holding my breath, I strike my Zippo, success! It burns small and blue and sheds little light. I draw quickly on my cigarette before the lack of oxygen snuffs out the flame. I quietly close the lighter and return it to my pocket.

The smoke is sweet and satisfying when I exhale. My lymph nodes are satiated, and once again, I find myself in need of oxygen. I hold my poncho up a few inches to let the air in, by cautiously cupping the burning coal in my hand, I enjoy my cigarette. When I am replete with nicotine, I extinguish my fag in the wet ground.

I make a quick check of my surroundings to discover Hamby sitting behind me wrapped stoically in his poncho. "Have you been up all night?" I whisper to Hamby.

"Yup," a man of few words; he puts his head down into his poncho and takes draw from his cigarette. The lightning flashes again, and I can vividly see him expelling the smoke. I turn and put my head underneath my cover once again and fall asleep. All the while, there is the soporific pitter-patter of rain drumming on my poncho.

I do not feel rested when awakened. I crudely and silently fold my poncho while Boutoff retrieves the Claymore and wire. The patrol begins walking back to our barbed wire. We hold up at the edge of the rubber trees and wait for dawn to materialize before breaking out of the woods and into a beautiful spring morning. The clouds are dissipating, the rain is slowly halting, and the sunshine makes us squint as we walk past our bunker line. Even the birds are singing.